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Guest column

Debate over mining conceals real issue in Central America

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The furor over whether the CIA adequately informed the intelligence committees of the Congress about the mining of Nicaragua's port is a sad thing because it shows how easily some members of Congress can be stampeded into forgetting about the issues before them for the sake of political posturing. The issue at hand, of course, is the fight over whether our own southern border shall continue to be friendly, or whether it will be under Soviet influence.

Let me begin by disposing of one issue: the intelligence committees knew about the mining. I knew because, on the afternoon of March 8, along with my colleagues, among whom were Senators Goldwater and Moynihan, I sat through an explanation of our nation's overall covert action program. As chairman of the Budget Subcommittee, I was paying attention. Nobody who was paying attention could fail to grasp the fact that the government of the U.S. was providing mines to foreigners whom we paid to lay them in certain ports in order to cut off the flow of Soviet arms and petroleum to Nicaragua's Sandinista regime. When senators are so notified, and they have the slightest disagreement with what is being done, they speak up. In the past, when a consensus has developed among senators that a particular activity should not be done, that activity has stopped. In the case of the mining, neither I nor anyone else spoke up. I approved and assumed that my colleagues did too.

Let there be no doubt: Nothing I have learned about the mining since that day has changed the picture that we received then. What item of information that has appeared in the press since then would lead someone who approved then to disapprove now? Some

cite the fact that a U.S. "Mother ship" was not mentioned. But the ship's existence makes no difference. Would the critics have been satisfied if the mine-laying boats had set out from Honduras instead of from a ship? I'm afraid that some of my colleagues did not think the mining objectionable until others, in the press, told them to think it objectionable.

But let us get to the main point. What are we doing supporting a civil war against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua? Is that right or wrong? I say it is right and am in good company in saying so.

In 1979, just after the Sandinistas had taken over Nicaragua, the Carter Administration, which had helped them do so, decided it had made a mistake. It noticed that the Sandinistas were repudiating their promises of democracy and non-alignment, and that they were becoming both totalitarian and allies of the Soviet Union. That is why the Carter Administration came to the intelligence committees with a request for money for covert action against the Sandinistas by a variety of violent and non-violent means. Note well the purpose of this covert action was to alter the character of the Sandinista regime.

In 1981, when the Reagan Administration re-defined the covert action program against the Sandinistas, its premise remained the same: The U.S. cannot afford to have, on this continent, this close to our southern border, a totalitarian regime allied with Moscow. To allow it would be to guarantee a big war later on. The conclusion, therefore was the same: to alter the Nicaraguan government by a variety of violent and non-violent means. The Administration's spokesman, a veteran diplomat named Tom Enders, explained it like this: "To do unto

Nicaragua what Nicaragua is trying to do in El Salvador . . .," that is to say, to change the government, but in the opposite direction.

In 1983 the Reagan Administration re-iterated its purpose to the Congress and the Congress approved. In 1984 the bipartisan Kissinger Commission unanimously re-stated what every honest person who has even looked at the problem has said — that a Sandinista regime, totalitarian and allied to Moscow, that consolidated its hold on Nicaragua, most likely could not be prevented from conquering its neighbors. I maintain that we cannot allow that to happen, and that mere talk and offers of aid will not stop the Sandinistas. They rule and conquer by the gun, and by that they must be fought. But whose guns? The president would prefer — and I agree — not to send American troops but rather to supply guns and equipment to those Nicaraguans who are trying to take back their country, — and the freedoms that the Sandinistas took from them by force of arms. These Nicaraguans are decent people, most of whom opposed Somoza, and some of whom fought alongside the Sandinistas until the Sandinistas sold out to Moscow.

It is right and decent for us to help freedom loving Nicaraguans to try to take back their country. Given the alternative, open war now or acquiescence in the Soviet conquest of Central America — with all that means in American blood and money down the road — are so much less appealing, we have little choice.

The mining of Nicaragua's ports was not done particularly well. There is legitimate room for constructive debate about how to change the Nicaraguan regime into something that does not pose a mortal danger to us in the long run. But those members of Congress who use the mining as a means of evading the central questions of that debate do no honor to the office they hold.